

HIGH TECH MEETS HIGH TOUCH: COHORT LEARNING ONLINE IN GRADUATE HIGHER EDUCATION

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This paper discusses the results of a qualitative participatory action research study where the purpose was to examine the nature of the cohort learning experience in an online master's program from both faculty and student perspectives.

There has been much discussion in higher and adult education circles in the last decade on distance education, web based and web enhanced learning online, and online degree programs. Nearly all institutions of higher education now offer at least some classes online, and many offer entire degree programs. While many have discussed the plusses and minuses of online education, and considered what online pedagogy offers to adult learners, there has been little discussion of what online education looks like specifically in online cohort programs, from the students' perspectives. Thus, the purpose of this paper is: (1) to discuss the results of a participatory action research project where the purpose was to examine the nature of the cohort learning experience in an online master's program that began with a residential component from both faculty and student perspectives; and (2) to consider the implications for the ongoing development of both "high tech" and "high touch" and academically sound degree programs in adult education and related areas.

Related Literature

Online degree programs are not only the wave of the future, they are also the wave of the present. There has been much discussion in the literature about how best to use online technology in both undergraduate and graduate degree programs (Dede, 1995, Greene, 1999; Schrumm, 1998). These new technologies in higher education have been met with both excitement and resistance; they have been seen by some as the great equalizer that offers far greater access to education, while others see them as propagating a greater gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots" through what is often termed, the "digital divide" (Lax, 2001; Mack, 2001). Sherron and Boetcher (1998) note that the main reasons for the proliferation of many degree programs online are the availability of communication through computing technologies; the need for workers to acquire new skills without interrupting their working lives for extended periods of time in this information age; and the need to reduce the cost of education. They suggest that students who use distance education do so not so much because they prefer it to on-campus instruction, but because it provides a way to reach their personal goals despite constraining personal circumstances. In many cases, those who are highly relational learners have found the "faceless" dimension of online learning somewhat impersonal and at times problematic in meeting their learning needs. It seems that online learning in a degree program that takes place specifically within an ongoing cohort of learners where learners meet each other in face to face at the beginning of the program can help deal with the problem of "faceless" classmates; it can give participants the opportunity to get to know each other as a whole person, rather than as a "print" person on screen.

The literature on cohort learning in online degree programs in cyberspace is relatively limited. Strohschen and Heaney (2000) have discussed the role of team teaching and learning and some cohort dynamics in attempting to implement a critical pedagogy approach in an online degree program. Their focus is more on the importance of collaboration than specifically on the cohort experience per se, but offers an important beginning to the discussion of the benefits of online cohorts in meeting the relational and collaborative needs of both teachers and students that results in important learning. Lawrence (1997), Bochenek (1999), and Brooks (1998) have all discussed the benefit of the cohort learning experience in adult degree programs more generally; their insights can easily be applied to the online learning community. While there are clearly online degree programs throughout the country that are conducted in cohorts, the literature

specifically on the cohort online learning experience, particularly that includes the voices of several of the student participants, is absent. Thus this paper gives voice to both the student and faculty participants.

Methodology

This was a participatory action research study where participants in the cohort master's program conducted research about themselves and their own experience of cohort learning online in their online master's program in adult education. This participatory action research project was part of what the cohort chose to do as part of their final integrative seminar, at the end of a 15-month master's program in adult education. As Merriam and Simpson (2000) note, participatory and action research is research conducted by participants specifically to make something happen. In this case, the participants in the program were using the opportunity of this concluding seminar to study, write about, and facilitate the integration of their own learning. They also were trying to give voice to their own experience of learning online, specifically in a cohort experience.

The primary means of data collection was participants' ongoing ONLINE discussion of readings about online education, review of key readings about adult development and learning in the program, and their application to their own lives, and their own educational practices. The instructors and the group together analyzed their comments and broke them into themes, based on the constant comparative method of data analysis (Merriam, 1998). Then various members of the group agreed to write up various sections of these themes incorporating key quotes of participants as thick rich description. The entire group then read and made comments on each one's section. Nearly all cohort members participated in this experience, as well as the two instructors who were team teachers for the course.

Findings

There were two primary areas of findings related to learning online in the context of this ongoing master's level cohort experience in National-Louis University's Department of Adult and Continuing Education program: 1) the ongoing negotiation of process, and 2) the ongoing construction of knowledge both of individuals and the group as a whole. A discussion of these findings will make more sense following an overview of this online master's program.

NLU Online Master's Program Overview

The Adult and Continuing Education Department (ACE) at National-Louis University launched its online master's graduate program (AOP) in adult and continuing education in 1998. This first fully online-supported graduate degree program in the department was modeled after its highly successful cohort-based face-to-face program. The program design emphasizes community building with several features: two courses each semester are integrated and taught by a faculty team of two; a residential starts out the program where students and faculty live and work in residence for several days; a four-month independent inquiry phase allows students to work with an advisor of choice to conduct research in an area of interest in the field; and typically a final residential experience fosters integration of both the academic and transformative learning that has taken place. A program director guides each cohort through their asynchronous learning journey, which takes place fully on bulletin boards. The AOP has used a number of web-based software over the years (e.g. TopClass, Discuss, and WebCT) with the same results: a 97% completion rate has been achieved in the program to date. Online distance education in the ACE Department is grounded in critical pedagogy, and is facilitated within a highly student-centered and negotiated framework of course delivery.

The Ongoing Negotiation of Process

Central to the first area of findings related to the ongoing negotiation of process were three primary categories: a) the importance of the residential; b) technological and flexible structure, and c) building ongoing relationships.

The importance of the residential. The two-day beginning residential was deemed as central to the success of the program. Several participants consider the residential as perhaps the most significant factor in contributing to the success of the online experience. The residential consists of structured formal and informal activities. Primary to students' interest as they enter the program is the need to become familiar with the technological aspects of online communication,

to get clarification of expectations for participation, and to understand the ways validation of completed assignments via distance is accomplished. A key element not generally known to students surfaces at the residential: the focus on community building and co-learning, which seems to be exacerbated in eLearning. Students acknowledge that meeting the cohort members and faculty allowed them to respond to more than "words on a screen," in the words of a participant. Through life history presentations and informal dialogue after classes, an atmosphere is created that makes space for trust building. As Mike put it, "It was when a professor sat down with me on the steps of the building that I knew I would feel comfortable in this program." The residential at the end of the program elucidates the importance of this affective aspect of learning. Students report that their own growth and habilitation into knowledge-producing scholars became clear to them as they progressed through the program. While faculty teams change each semester, the students increasingly rely on one another's voices on the screen to verify, validate, and critically reflect individually and in group on their respective contributions to the discourse on the given topics. The residential sets the tone for negotiated co-learning and establishes an interdependency in the roles of "teacher and student."

Building a specific but flexible structure. Building a specific but flexible structure was also important, which included having specific and clear course requirements, a more or less "closed" cohort group with room for others, the flexibility of negotiating course assignments and room to deal with technological problems. Prior to the start of each term, the syllabus for each course was posted in the online classroom. Members of the cohort have the opportunity to review the course outline, proposed texts, and assignments and make suggestions for changes or adjustments. Suggestions have been minimal, and changes were negotiated easily. Robin noted "It was more that it was out there if we chose to negotiate...the feeling that you can help control your own learning experience is very empowering."

The cohort remained intact throughout the program. The relationships, which began at the residential, developed throughout each term, and Pam noted that "as the courses progressed, members learned a great deal about each other. An atmosphere of mutual respect prevailed as discussions sometimes became intense when members shared opinions, feelings and personal experiences. Life changes occurred in the cohort including a birth, medical problems, family issues and professional crises including job changes." During the last term one new member, who had started the program with an earlier cohort, was added to the group, and became a part of the group relatively easily. As Marguerite notes, "...it helped that he was in an earlier cohort". Thus, the cohort is mostly a closed group, but the structure is flexible enough to include an occasional student from another cohort.

There are always some technological problems in online programs. During the residential, "the technology" was cited as one of the main concerns upon entering the program; a portion of the residential was spent on training to use the particular software (Discus). Nevertheless, many members expressed the frustrations experienced in dealing with various aspects of technology. Mary describes her experience using the Mac computer, "Once I learned how to navigate – by trial and error in the system, the technology was easy." Marguerite "needed additional technical support and paid a private consultant." As the program progressed, however, many of the technological issues were resolved. Mary Lynn's comment puts the issue in perspective, "They (technology problems) are to be expected in this kind of environment."

The ongoing building of relationships. The ongoing building of relationships among students and professors where all were seen as simultaneously teachers and learners was another important factor in the ongoing negotiation of process. Relationship became an integral part of the online learning experience. Some noted that until the last term, the fact that the cohort consisted of all women might have added to the significance that relationships played. Mary noted "We found common ground in the experience of being female. It became easy and comfortable to reveal deep feelings about the adventures (positive and negative) of learning as a woman... While we bonded well as a group of women, there were no adverse results when a man joined the group." In reflecting on joining the group the last term, Mike noted, "having the support of the cohort in doing so helps greatly. It's like walking into a room of people you don't know...if there is acceptance, you can get on with business more easily than if there is resistance." And as Janet notes, "Every good relationship is based around some commonality" and there was the commonality of a cohort learning experience online.

There were a number of collaborative assignments, and participants noted that these were an opportunity to develop friendships via telephone calls and emails. Janet observed "We learned to value the differences in perceptions based on age, race, politics, culture, marital status, life experiences, and the last term, gender, because they became tools for learning. Our various backgrounds and ways of knowing made the learning very broad." An obvious factor in online relationships is that no one can attend class and not participate. As Pam notes, "Everyone had to find her voice. I feel that I know people far better than I might have in the less intense situation of a classroom. " And Mary explained that "without inflection, tone, body language or eye contact, our words and stories built our relationships." Sharing one's personal story and life experience relative to the discussion of readings was not only an important part of relationship-building but also the theory-practice connection of how one applies what one is learning in practice. Mary summed up the group's experience and wrote "We concluded that the power of online learning includes building relationships. Criteria for success are 1) meeting at the residential, 2) remaining together throughout the program, 3) being open, honest and participatory in postings and feedback, 4) respecting and learning from the diversity of experiences and opinions. These factors produced a comfortable, supportive, trusting, and productive group relationship."

The Ongoing Construction of Knowledge of Individuals and the Group

The cohort experience was particularly important in regard to the second set of findings, the ongoing construction of both individual and group knowledge. These set of findings fell into three primary areas: a) Team teaching/cohort learning contributed to Transformative learning; b) the connection of theory to real life practice; c) the value of group support in conducting research and new knowledge together.

Team teaching—cohort learning as contributing to transformative learning. Nearly all members considered their learning on-line experience a transformative learning experience where they constructed new knowledge together. Marguerite, in thinking about the cohort noted "I have developed personally and professionally through my exposure to their ideas, their contributions, their passion and compassion." Cohort members provide a continuity, and yet a diversity of voices, and Marguerite went on to explain "our cohort provided balance in the voices of teachers and students. Each cohort is a unique blend of personalities and fields of experience, which can challenge concerns about isolation with online learning." Mary Lynn emphasized the professional development of the cohort and noted "Professionally, I was exposed to more areas of the field of Adult Education than just my own practice areas," and Mary explained "Learning in a cohort was transformative because it became so much more comfortable to professionally facilitate different views in a classroom." Speaking specifically on the issue of constructing new knowledge together Mary Lynn noted, "Having the opportunity to reflect and build on the contributions of others made the knowledge I constructed more powerful. I liked the asynchronous discussion board..."

In general, the team teaching dimension was experienced positively and as another potential avenue to interact with new ideas. But as Pam noted, "Team teaching was very effective when the team members both took part. Some faculty handled the online classroom better than others." Mary Lynn explained that the team teaching "In most cases, was great because we got the benefit of different 'expert' perspectives on the same topic," enabling them to construct knowledge in new and deeper ways. Mary referred to the benefit of the residential in meeting a couple of the instructors personally and face to face. "I definitely felt more bonded with and had a sense of relationship with the instructors I'd met personally. The face to face heightened my awareness of the gift of our senses and the value of seeing, hearing, and touching. I felt I knew them, and they me."

Connecting theory to real life practice. In explaining the connection of theory to real life practice and its role in knowledge construction, Janet explained "First, we had to examine our primary purpose for coming together, which was to study the theories and practices...to develop our own philosophies about Adult Education and how they relate to real-life practice. Secondly, we had to find ways to transfer the value of the experience of learning in an online cohort and how that experience relates to practice." Janet goes on to explain the importance of learning enough adult education content "in order to begin to develop our own theories." The knowledge

how has changed Mary Lynn's practice as an adult instructor in that she is "more careful when building thematic units and curriculum changes to include real life contextual materials." She goes on to explain that, "I am more conscious of silence during discussions and let the students help each other draw out their own experiences more. I have stopped using 12 year old reading texts and moved forward to more relevant materials." When asked about considerations in negotiating planning with others who may have differing philosophies on AE, Robin felt that colleagues needed to be reminded that these are adults, who may be subject matter experts in their own field, and who are probably self-directed learners in that field specifically. Because of these three factors, she felt that, "This means a change in the way an educator, views her/his role in the process of education, and also a change in the way material is presented, negotiated and the way grades are assessed."

When examining the impact of learning in an online cohort and how that experience relates to practice, Janet explains, "we were better informed about the knowledge because of time that online learning allowed for intense and well thought out interaction with the content. Yet, what was most powerful for all of us was that the cohort provided the safe environment for permitting us to take a hard and honest look at our own knowledge how. Therefore, the online cohort experience added great value to each individual's ability to determine either 'how they are' in their practice or 'how they plan to change' their practice."

The value of group support in further exploration/student research. Robin explored the role of group support in enabling the group to go deeper into the material and also conduct and complete research projects, and explains "The cohort became a place for some of us to bounce ideas off of one another and as a place to build a team to help in research." Some focused more on support for creating and accessing knowledge, while others gained more from the emotional support and encouragement to go deeper. As Robin notes in summing up the group that the cohort was valuable in the research and knowledge construction process in "knowing they were writing to an audience, an audience that they knew in this case, helped them hone their work. Still others took what those around them researched and used it to springboard their own ideas."

While virtually all members used the cohort for both intellectual and emotional support, the research process itself is often a solitary process, and many of their comments reflected this, particularly in regard to the research term. As Janet explains "As much as I enjoyed the cohort, I felt that I did my research projects mostly alone. I felt that when we had collaborative book reports, each on a different aspect of the study, that reading from the others was a wonderful way to not have to do so much research and to receive the benefit of other's research. I guess they aided just by my knowing who would be reading my project and feeling that I wanted my work to be respected by them." Mary Lynn also noted, "I learned a lot from the others in my cohort, but none of it related directly to the research for my inquiry. I completed that research on my own." Pam also expressed this although she didn't find it problematic and explains "I had no problem with doing the research on my own. If I had needed help or aid from the cohort, I would have felt comfortable asking for it." And Robin noted, "I didn't really feel a connection with my cohort during the Inquiry project. They all chose such different topics from mine that I really didn't feel I could ask them for help." While some of this was more or less expected, given that aspects of research are a somewhat solitary process, it was clear that they had a different experience of conducting this participatory action research project than they did of their inquiry term when they were conducting a solitary research project. But both of these aspects were ways of constructing both individual and group knowledge.

Conclusions and Implications for Practice

Not unlike other communication technology that the last century brought to society, online technology is but a tool. The findings of this participatory action research suggest that the relationship building in a context of democratically negotiated power sharing and an interdependence of the roles of teacher and learner are of primary importance for the success of online graduate programs.

The design feature of the residential at the start of the National-Louis University ACE graduate program validates that self-directed learning can be fomented within community when community is purposefully upheld as a mutually accepted value. The authenticity of the cohort, wherein students may take the right to negotiate content and structure of the program with

professors, is foundational to collective learning and subsequent action. In the AOP, this authenticity is largely derived from the critical pedagogy mode of the ACE Department.

The basic format of asynchronous discussion boards is sufficient for discourse and study in the field of adult education, based in such a pedagogy. Although the technology and skills to utilize functions like voice or video-streaming or white boards are available, it is the simplicity of amplifying cohort members' voices in a trusting environment that maintains a cohesive learning community online. When access to the discussion boards failed due to server outages, for example, students and faculty resorted to email not unlike one might move a class meeting from a closed campus to an alternate location. The flexibility of adjusting the schedule and structure can be easily accepted when a clarity of expectations, succinctly stated assignments, and specific resources and support have been communicated.

Perhaps most important to the success of an online graduate program is the intentional reciprocation of roles among cohort members, modeled by the faculty team from the very beginning of the program during the first residential. Online, everyone's written contributions "stand in front of the class," and syntheses and analyses of concepts and ideas become a collective and collaborative means of knowledge production by the cohort group.

The implication for a participatory praxis of adult education online is simple: it is found in the authentic voices of the learners as they collaboratively create knowledge and self-determine personal growth in a community of trust and mutual support in a cohort setting.

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